

AUDIO

FAQ

Q Why do some MP3 players distort when EQ is applied?

A Commercial music is mixed to be as loud as possible, mainly so that it sounds good next to other tracks on the radio. Ultimately, though, the listener will set the volume to his or her liking. However, problems can arise depending on the order in which equalisation, volume control and digital-to-analogue conversion is applied.

The audio signal in an MP3 file is at full volume, so boosting the bass, treble or any other frequencies of this raw audio stream will cause distortion. Better MP3 players avoid this problem, either by reducing the volume to the required listening level before applying EQ, by reducing the volume automatically to avoid distortion or by increasing the bit-depth and therefore the headroom before distortion. If your player distorts when you apply EQ, you'll need to cut rather than boost frequencies to get the sound you want.

Ben Pitt

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SONY NW-A805

★★★★★

£110 inc VAT



The A805 comes from Sony's new range of video-capable MP3 players. Sony has abandoned hard disks entirely in its Walkman range, and its MP3 players now use solid-state memory, which is surprising. The A805's 2GB capacity is miserly, but the A806 (£140) is the same player with a 4GB capacity, while the A808 (£180) has an 8GB capacity. The advantage of solid-state memory is compactness. At just 9mm thick and weighing 53g, the NW-A805 disappears inside pockets. The design isn't as iconic as the iPod's but it looks just as luxurious, and its 2in screen is around twice the size of the iPod nano's 1.5in screen. If the pink finish doesn't appeal, you can opt for white or black.

You transfer music to the player using the bundled SonicStage software, which is slightly irritating compared with iTunes or Windows Media Player, but bearable. The Image Converter software for transferring photos and videos is excellent, automatically converting a wide variety of formats to the native JPEG and MPEG4 formats at the optimal settings for high image quality without wasting capacity. USB transfers are slow, though, averaging 1.19MB/s.

The controls and menus are straightforward and, despite the lack of a rotary control, extremely quick for navigating large music collections. Having such a large screen with room for 11 lines of text helps. The display's vibrant colours make videos and photos look great,



but two inches is still too small to warrant watching anything more than short video clips.

The best thing about the A805 is its sound quality. The player itself sounded detailed and focused, and unlike many players, its EQ settings didn't cause distortion. However, it's the headphones that really make the difference. Even at flat EQ settings they sounded remarkably full-bodied and clear, making other sets we once admired sound weak. The plug-shaped design cuts down on background noise, but they're not the most comfortable set we've used.

The A800-series players are the best MP3 players we have seen. However, they cost almost double the price of equivalent-capacity Sandisk Sansa e200-series players (see 'Also Consider...', below). Sony's player is thinner, its screen is bigger and its controls and sound quality are a little better, but overall it's not twice as good, and £110 is too much to pay for any 2GB player. Moving up to an 8GB model shouldn't add £70 to the price, either, as flash memory isn't that expensive. However, if getting a great MP3 player is more important than getting great value, this is the one to buy.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent sound quality
- ✓ Luxurious design
- ✗ Expensive

MP3 PLAYER 2GB capacity (4GB (£140) and 8GB (£180) versions also available), supports MP3, WMA, ATRAC, AAC audio, JPEG image, MPEG4 video, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE NWA805B.CE7
SUPPLIER www.play.com
DETAILS www.sony.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



Also consider...

PHILIPS SLA5520

★★★★★

£80 inc VAT



Philips' SLA5520 takes music from your PC via a wireless network and plays it on your hi-fi. It comes with Philips' own server program, but you can also use it with Windows Media Connect.

The SLA5520 is quite a basic device, but it's a great buy if you want an easy way to play your music wirelessly.



WIRELESS NETWORK MUSIC PLAYER Supports MP3, Wav, WMA, WMA-DRM, 802.11g interface, WEP or WPA encryption, 3.5mm socket audio output. Requires Windows 2000/XP
SUPPLIER www.broadbandstuff.co.uk
DETAILS www.philips.com

- ✓ Good value
 - ✗ Screen hard to read
- FULL REVIEW Jul 2006

LOGITECH X-230

★★★★★

£27 inc VAT



The X-230s sound clearer, richer and more balanced than any other set under £50 and quite a few that are more expensive than that. If you're looking for a good set for music or games, there are no better speakers available at this price.



STEREO SPEAKERS 2.1, 32W power, 3.5mm stereo cable inputs
PART CODE 970123-1120
SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.logitech.com

- ✓ Excellent sound quality
 - ✗ Cabling is awkward
- FULL REVIEW Jun 2007

LOGITECH Z-5450

★★★★★

£202 inc VAT



Logitech's Z-5450 5.1 surround-sound speakers transmit sound to the rear set wirelessly, so you'll have less clutter in your living room. Sound quality is excellent and the speakers are loud.

With loads of inputs and a decoder, these speakers are perfect for your PC or DVD player.



5.1 SPEAKERS Three line inputs, one coaxial and two optical digital inputs, 315W RMS power
PART CODE 970191-0120
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk

- ✓ Sound great; loads of features
 - ✗ Expensive
- FULL REVIEW Dec 2006

IRHYTHMS A-303

★★★★

£100 inc VAT



Irhythms is the new brand name for Cyber-Acoustics' range of iPod dock speaker systems. The A-303 is mains powered and comes with seven dock adaptors for third-generation and later iPods, including the original iPod Nano and Shuffle. The Shuffle dock adaptor is nothing more than a holder, though, so you'll have to connect its headphone out to the A-303's line input. A remote control starts and stops playback, skips tracks and adjusts the volume, and there are volume buttons on the unit, too.

It's remarkable how much bass the makers have squeezed out of such a small unit, which reproduces frequencies as low as 40Hz accurately. High frequencies were slightly lacking, but the overall tone was warm and pleasant. It didn't sound as bright and clear as Logitech's AudioStation iPod speakers (see 'Also Consider', below) but the A-303 costs around £30 less. Like other iPod speakers, they're overpriced, but they do sound good.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Compact design
- ✓ Warm tone
- ✗ Overpriced, like most iPod speakers

IPOD DOCK SPEAKERS Line input, iPod dock connector, 28W RMS power
PART CODE ACO19302
SUPPLIER www.microanvika.com
DETAILS www.irhythms.com

SENNHEISER PC156 USB

★★★★

£55 inc VAT



This headset lives up to Sennheiser's excellent reputation for high-quality headphones and microphones. Music was warm and detailed, with emphasised deep bass that flattered pop music and games. The microphone is equally impressive, capturing full-bodied speech with plenty of presence to aid intelligibility.

The headset's cable is littered with widgets. At one end there's a USB connection that handles audio coming in and out of the PC. Then comes a compact box built into the cable that serves as a USB audio interface, followed by a pair of mini-jack sockets and plugs that carry the headphone and microphone signals. You can unplug the mini-jack plugs to use the headset with non-USB devices. Then comes three metres of cable, with a bulky cable tidy in case you don't actually need the full length, followed by an in-line volume control and a clip to attach to clothing. It's untidy, but it's not bad enough to distract from the excellent sound quality.

Ben Pitt

SUMMARY

- ✓ Excellent sound quality
- ✓ Uses USB or standard mini-jack
- ✗ Messy cabling

USB HEADSET Headphone input and microphone output on 3.5mm jack plugs, 3.5mm jack-to-USB converter
SUPPLIER www.nusystems.co.uk
DETAILS www.sennheiser.co.uk

CHOOSING AN... MP3 Player

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

CAPACITY: 512MB
TECHNOLOGY: Flash memory
INTERFACE: USB Hi-Speed
BATTERY: Disposable
SUPPORTED FORMATS: MP3, WMA
 Recommended minimum in grey

1 Above you'll see a typical specification for an MP3 player that costs £30. Using flash memory means it can be very small and light, but its 512MB capacity provides room for just a few albums of MP3s encoded at 128Kbit/s. It's worth buying a player with 1GB or more to provide greater listening choice while on the move.

Cheap players often cut corners when it comes to sound quality, so approach these with caution. Flash-based players aren't sensitive to shocks or bumps, so they're ideal if you want to use them while jogging.

2 If you don't mind something bulkier, consider devices that use alternative storage technology. Hard disk-based players have up to 60GB capacity, so they can hold hundreds of albums; prices start at £150. Players based on tiny 1in hard disks of between 1.5GB and 8GB capacity cost from £100, and provide an excellent balance of portability and capacity. Hard disk players are sensitive to shocks and can be damaged if dropped, so you need to take care of them.

3 You'll need a PC to upload files to your MP3 player. A USB Hi-Speed interface will enable you to upload files a lot quicker than using a USB 1.1 connection.

4 Battery life varies between two and 50 hours. Hard disk players are the most power-hungry and benefit from a lithium-ion battery, which is light and easy to recharge.

If you will be away from a power supply for long periods, look for a player with a replaceable battery so you can carry spares.

5 If you want to download files from online music stores, you'll need a player that supports protected tracks. If you've got an iPod it will play only tracks purchased from the iTunes Music Store. If you've got a different player, make sure it plays protected WMA files. If a player is certified with the Plays For Sure logo it will play all protected WMA files available from the biggest music stores.

LOGITECH AudioStation

★★★★★

£128 inc VAT



Logitech's AudioStation is a mid-range iPod speaker dock, but it sounds better than many that cost more. It's the only dock we've tested with an FM tuner, a sensible addition given no iPod has its own. You can't synchronise a docked iPod with your PC, but the AudioStation is great value, and the first iPod dock to deserve our Best Buy award.



IPOD DOCK STEREO SPEAKERS iPod dock connector and 3/8mm stereo line input, composite/S-video outputs, FM radio, 80W RMS power **PART CODE** 97 0217-0120 **SUPPLIER** www.morecomputers.com **DETAILS** www.logitech.co.uk ✓ Clear, loud sound ✗ No iPod PC connector **FULL REVIEW** Jan 2007

SANDISK Sansa e270

★★★★★

£88 inc VAT

PRICE CUT!



BEST BUY Sandisk's Sansa e270 has 6GB of storage, but it costs less than Apple's 2GB iPod nano. Unlike the nano, it can play back video files on its colour screen; its software makes it easy to convert and transfer them. It isn't as easy to use as an iPod, but its good battery and sound make it a great choice.

FLASH MP3 PLAYER 6GB capacity, supports MP3, WMA and WMA-DRM music, JPEG/bitmap picture files and proprietary video files, USB Hi-Speed interface **PART CODE** SDMX4-6144 **SUPPLIER** www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.sandisk.co.uk ✓ Lots of space; good sound ✗ Nano has better controls **FULL REVIEW** Feb 2007

Battery life -50% Reference +50% +100%

APPLE iPod Shuffle

★★★★★

£50 inc VAT



Apple's tiny iPod Shuffle is affordable and beautifully designed. It's light, with an integrated metal clip that grips clothing securely. The controls are basic: there is just track skip. Battery life and sound are both good, though, so it's a great player if you can live without a screen and don't mind using iTunes.



FLASH MP3 PLAYER 1GB capacity, supports MP3, AAC, protected AAC, Wav, AIFF, audible and Apple lossless music, USB Hi-Speed interface **PART CODE** MA564ZT/A **SUPPLIER** www.dabs.com **DETAILS** www.apple.com/uk ✓ Tiny; great design ✗ No display **FULL REVIEW** Feb 2007

Battery life -50% Reference +50% +100%